

Statement of Rep. John Kline (R-MN)
Chairman, U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Rules Committee Consideration of H.J.Res. 118, providing for congressional disapproval of
the administration's July 12, 2012 waiver of welfare work requirements
September 19, 2012

Good evening Chairman Dreier, Ranking Member Slaughter, and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of H.J.Res. 118, legislation that will stop the Obama administration's effort to roll back successful welfare reforms.

The Government Accountability Office has determined the administration's waiver plan is a rule and subject to congressional review. That is precisely what we are trying to do.

This joint resolution embodies two important principles every member of Congress should support. First, successful policies that help low-income families leave government dependency and enter the workforce should be strengthened and encouraged. Second, Congress must act when the president of the United States oversteps his legal authority.

Without consulting Congress, the Department of Health and Human Services announced in July it would allow states to waive the work requirements at the center of the 1996 welfare reform law. The public and members of Congress were understandably surprised. The law clearly does not allow the administration to waive these requirements.

The president's controversial action tarnished a long history of working across the aisle to improve welfare assistance. For decades, failed policies left impoverished families trapped in a cycle of dependency and poverty. A Democratic president vowed to end that broken welfare system and a Republican Congress helped him stay true to his word.

The results of this bipartisan effort exceeded the expectations of supporters and proved naysayers wrong. In the years following enactment, caseloads declined by 57 percent, employment of single mothers increased by 15 percent, and child poverty in female-headed households fell significantly. In short, welfare reform helped end dependency, reduce poverty, and offer a brighter future to millions of families.

Welfare reform was a success primarily because for the first time it required able-bodied adults to work, search for work, or prepare for work as a condition of receiving cash assistance. As President Clinton alluded to the day he signed reform into law, it was time to stop the “never-ending cycle of welfare” and promote “the dignity, the power, and the ethic of work.”

It is now our responsibility to defend this successful, bipartisan law against an unprecedented attack by the Obama administration. I would like to explain briefly why the president’s welfare waiver scheme is bad policy that sets dangerous precedent.

Ignoring the heart of the law will unwind years of progress in moving families from welfare to work. Even in this tough economy – with 23 million Americans searching for a full-time job – the percentage of children in female-headed households living in poverty is still lower today than sixteen years ago. Welfare reform and its strong work requirements have played an important role in the progress these families have made. Waiving the law’s work requirements will only weaken a critical lifeline for those in need.

The president’s waiver scheme will also take us back to a time when states were able to game the system. A 2005 report by the GAO revealed some states claimed bed rest, weight loss, and personal journaling as work-related activities. In response, Congress demanded greater oversight when it last reauthorized the welfare program. Now, under the guise of state flexibility, similar abuses of the system could take place at the expense of needy families and taxpayers.

Finally, if left unchecked, the president’s welfare waiver policy would invite future executive overreach. The law simply does not empower the administration to waive the work requirements. If the president has ideas for strengthening welfare reform and promoting greater state flexibility, he should send these proposals to Congress. Yet the president hasn’t done that. Instead, he is attempting to unilaterally rewrite the law through executive fiat. We cannot stand by and allow that to happen.

For these reasons, I urge my colleagues to support H.J.Res. 118 and a closed rule to provide for its consideration. This important resolution will protect policies that have helped lift families out of poverty and send a strong message to the president that Congress will not stand by as he dismantles welfare reform.